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The Transpersonal Tradition in Russian Culture

Vladimir Maykov

The transpersonal tradition is deeply rooted in Russian culture. Unlike any other country in the world, Russia is geographically connected to Asia, the Near East and Europe. In addition, Russia has its own shamanic culture, Celtic pagan tradition, and Russian Orthodox Church. This rich tapestry underlies Russian thinkers and writers of recent centuries who embody within their works the principles and spirit of transpersonalism. Even though the transpersonal vision is new in the West, it is traditional in Russia.

We can see three distinct layers underlying the Russian transpersonal tradition, which establish its origins in distant antiquity. First, there is an ancient layer of shamanism—a practice that continues in Russia to this day. Contemporary shamans live and work in places such as Buryat, Tuvina, Altai, Yakutiya, and Khakassiya. Second is a layer of Russian paganism: Celtic paganism held sway over western Russia for centuries and left its imprint. Then there is a more modern layer, covering the last thousand years.

In the modern layer, I identify seven different roots of Russian transpersonalism. The first of these is the Russian Orthodox Church, which includes the mystical doctrine of hesychasm. Although there are many aspects to hesychasm, it includes both a practice in which the saying of prayers is synchronized with the breath, and a contemplative phenomenon in which one's chest begins to vibrate and shake. Clearly, Russian Orthodox mysticism invokes altered states of consciousness.

In addition to Russian Christianity, there is the Russian religious philosophy of N. Berdyaev and L. Schestov, the theosophy of E.P. Blavatsky, the anthropology of R. Steiner, the existentialist writings of authors such as L. Tolstoy and F. Dostoevsky, the Fourth Way of G.I. Gurdjieff, and the tradition of Russian cosmism of such visionaries as S.N. Fyodorov, K.E. Tsiolkovsky, and academician V. Vernadsky. Together these inform the modern transpersonal project in Russia.

Transpersonalism is thus inherent in the Russian soul. Yet it is not easy to explain our inner being, the soul behind Russian transpersonalism. It has been said that excavating the Russian soul is like peeling an onion: the more you penetrate its layers, the more you cry. In the end, you are left with empty nothingness. In fact, as noted by the academician D.S. Lihachev, space holds a

special place in Russian consciousness. Russians experience space as open sky, as the pure potentiality of life that pulls you out of bondage.

There is an archetypal wounding of the Russian soul, typified by the image of St. George lancing the dragon. This symbol has been central to Russian national imagery for five hundred years. How does this wounding manifest itself? Personal development is different in Russia than in the West. In the West, the body is born, it becomes a personality, and then it spends its life striving to become a spiritual being. In Russia, the body is born and, through wounding, it becomes a spiritual being. But there is almost a full absence of personality in the Western sense of the word, with its correlatives of civil society, lawful state, democracy, market economy and declaration of human rights. Rather, the Russian soul must spend its life striving to become a personality—trying to become functional in society.

The continuous historical development of this transpersonal urge was interrupted early in the 20th century. The gap between that time and ours was bridged by a small cohort of thinkers and practitioners who escaped from Stalin's terror and raised Russian transpersonalism from the ashes: men such as V.V. Nalimov, M.M. Bakhtin, A.F. Losev, M.K. Mamardashvili, A.M. Pyatigorsky and V.N. Mihejkin. In the 1970s and 80s a broader transpersonal underground developed, laying the groundwork for the founding of the Russian Association of Humanistic Psychology in 1990, shortly after Perestroika. In May of 2002 we took a further step toward professional development with the founding of the Russian Association of Transpersonal Psychology and Psychotherapy.

The Russian transpersonal project of today is more highly professional and many-sided than ever before. Many academic scientists have been drawn to this perspective, yielding a community in which intensive searches are conducted in many directions; there is no strict adherence to any one epistemology or theoretical framework. Russia, a country with centuries-old transpersonal roots, is poised to speak with the entire world in the common language of the transpersonal.

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